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SUBJECT: SUSPENDED PRESIDENT TRAIAN BASESCU WINS REFERENDUM VOTE

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¶1. (SBU) Romanians voted overwhelmingly against the removal of President Traian Basescu from office on May 19. The President will likely return to his presidential duties on May 22, once the Constitutional Court validates the referendum and publishes it in the official record. The Central Electoral Office released on May 21 close-to-final (99.6 percent of precincts reporting) preliminary data showing that 74 percent of voters said "no" to the president's dismissal, while only 25 percent voted for the impeachment. With a turnout rate of 44 percent (more than 8 million people voted out of 18 million registered voters), Basescu received the endorsement of almost a million more voters than he received in the 2004 presidential election.

¶2. (SBU) After the polls closed (and after two exit polls predicted he would receive around 75 percent of the vote), President Basescu joined a public rally of about 1,000 supporters in University Square. Basescu said the overwhelming vote for him was evidence that Romanians endorsed his political projects, including continuing justice reforms, enacting a lustration law, revising the Constitutional division of powers, introducing the uninominal vote, and decentralizing the Romanian healthcare and education systems. He claimed the vote was "proof Romanians will modernize the political class." He suggested he would return to the square every three months in order to give a "direct report" to the Romanian people on his activity. Basescu said the large number of votes he received also demonstrated how far the parliament (two-thirds of which had voted to suspend him) was divorced from the public's interest. However, he closed by extending an offer to cooperate in the future with the parliament and political parties.

¶3. (SBU) Exit surveys showed Basescu received substantial support from voters who said they were affiliated with parties that had sought the President's impeachment. Some 58 percent of Liberal and UDMR voters cast their ballots in favor of Basescu, along with 45 percent of Vadim Tudor's Romania Mare voters, and even a quarter of Social Democratic voters. It is also worth noting that exit polling showed Basescu garnering two-thirds of the votes from followers of Gigi Becali's New Generation Party (PNG), in addition to the expected overwhelming support from the Democratic and Liberal Democratic parties, which backed Basescu. Basescu's overwhelming popular support was also reflected throughout the regions. Basescu received 85 percent of the vote in Sibiu county; over 80 percent in Brasov, Arad, Bistrita-Nasaud, Covasna, and Bihor counties; some 75 percent in Bucharest; and between 60-80 percent in other counties, including the Social Democratic stronghold of Iasi and the UDMR Hungarian dominated Mures and Harghita counties.

¶4. (SBU) All party leaders of the anti-Basescu coalition have, in

various ways, conceded defeat after the announcement of the results of the exit polls. Social Democratic Party (PSD) leader Mircea Geoana - responsible for initiating the campaign to suspend Basescu from office - insisted that parliament's decision to suspend Basescu was nevertheless a legitimate one, even without the endorsement of the people in the referendum. He characterized the referendum result as a "victory without glory" and evinced his hope that Basescu learned his lesson from the suspension. He announced late on May 21 that the PNL government was fragile and under "imminent" danger of being dismissed, and said PSD would start negotiations with the other parties to create a "transparent" parliamentary majority to govern for the remainder of the mandate.

¶5. (SBU) Prime Minister Calin Popescu Tariceanu (PNL leader) remarked that Romanians gave President Basescu "a second chance...to act responsibly." He noted however that Basescu's priorities were not those of Romanians, but pledged to cooperate with the President, "for Romania's benefit." Despite PNL Bucharest leader Ludovic Orban's call for the Liberals to move to the opposition, Tariceanu refused to resign on May 21 and PNL leadership voted 31-2 in favor of remaining in government and trying to cooperate with the President. The head of the Conservative Party (PC), Dan Voiculescu, pointed to the low turnout in the referendum and said that Basescu should not claim in the future that he represents the people, as he was entitled to speak only on behalf of 30 percent of registered voters. Voiculescu also warned the president that he would continue to monitor Basescu's future actions closely, but expressed hopes that Basescu would transform himself and "start to build for Romania and for Romania." The return is official once the Constitutional Court's decision is published in the Official Gazette. The Constitutional Court will send its report to the Parliament, which

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will convene in a joint session to take note of President's return to office.

¶6. (SBU) Comment: The referendum results were in some ways anticlimactic, as they tracked closely with pre-vote polling data and with the exit polls that we saw on the date of the referendum. While NGO poll-watchers reported poor organization in some voting precincts (note: Pro Democracy Association told us that their referendum observers received over 2000 calls reporting irregularities and complaining about the voting process) they agreed that there were no/no serious issues that might call into question the legitimacy and accuracy of the referendum vote. End Comment.

TAUBMAN